Teresa Prados-Torreira

Women and the Spanish-American War

One hundred years ago, the United States and Spain engaged in a military confrontation in Cuba known as the Spanish-American War. By the time this conflict ended in August 1898, Spain had lost the last remnants of its empire, while the U.S. had acquired its first imperial possessions— the Philippines and Guam in the Pacific and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean.

This centennial gives us a good opportunity to re-examine not only the conflict itself, but also its impact on women, both Cuban and American. In the U.S., references to the Spanish-American War bring to mind images of Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders, of sea battles and land scuffles in tropical lands, in which brave young men demonstrated their manliness. Seldom do we think that women played a role in this "splendid little war." Were American women affected by the war? How were notions of womanhood used during this period by both promoters of the war and by its detractors? Is there anything for women to commemorate during this centennial?

While the Spanish-American War has been reduced in the American imagination to a brief confrontation between Spain and the U.S., in reality the conflict spanned more than 30 years and two generations, while Cubans fought desperately to rid themselves of colonial rule. Cuban woman played a highly active part in their island's struggle for independence from Spain. The rebel army's poverty made it imperative to rely on women's active involvement. Women became true symbols of Cuba's determination to break away from the colonial yoke, and joined the fight in a variety of ways: they fed the soldiers and sewed their uniforms; they wrote political pamphlets and carried correspondence across enemy lines; they raised funds, served as nurses, and fought on the front lines with the rebel army. This active role in their island's struggle for independence failed to be translated into significant political gains for women after the war. Freedom, when it came for both Cuba and its women, fell short of expectations raised by the war.

At the dawn of the 20th century, Americans confronted important challenges. The economic growth of the late 1800s transformed the U.S. into an industrial society of urban dwellers. As more Americans abandoned the rural environment their parents and grandparents had created, they began to occupy professional ranks required by the emerging corporate society. Office work constituted a less active, less physical life than previous generations of male workers had experienced. Critics wondered whether this sedate lifestyle, exacerbated by labor-saving technological innovations, was having a detrimental effect on American manhood. Were American men becoming effeminate as a result of progress?

The increase in popularity of male competitions of physical and athletic prowess in this period indicated a return to manly values. For Theodore Roosevelt, the antidote to over-civilization was to offer men renewed opportunities to display the traditionally masculine virtues of bravery and physical skills that wars had required of them in the past. In military conflicts, men would regain their manhood.

If the impact of modern civilization on men was worrisome, so too was its impact on women. By the turn of the century, women were rapidly expanding their roles in society. From factories to colleges, from the labor movement to the suffrage movement, women increasingly demanded more freedom and greater participation in society. Abandoning traditional notions of Victorian womanhood, the younger generation of "new women" challenged the confining roles that had limited their mothers and grandmothers, and began to live more active lives. Were American women losing their femininity? Were they becoming too free, too active, too much like men? A significant drop in birthrates among educated women seemed to confirm the worst fears of defenders of traditional Victorian values, who argued that so much freedom and education rendered women incapable of reproducing. Theodore Roosevelt, recently awarded a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor for his attack on San Juan Hill, was one of these defenders of Victorian values.

The Spanish-American War reflected tensions embedded in late 19th-century cultural values about gender. It offered an opportunity for

American men to regain their sense of manhood, tattered by the ease of modern life and by pushy "new women." In combat, men once again would prove their worth by testing their moral and physical fiber. Women would stay at home and tend the hearth, waiting for their men to return.

But at home, women could also play an important political role. No one saw this more clearly than the leading representatives of the yellow press, Joseph Pulitzer and his *New York World*, and more significantly, William Randolph Hearst and his *New York Journal*, both of which used traditional notions of womanhood to incite war fever, and, in the process, triple their profits. The best example of this kind of manipulation came with the *Journal*'s campaign to save a Cuban woman, Evangelina Cisneros, from imprisonment.

Evangelina Cosio Cisneros, a young Cuban woman, had been sentenced to 20 years in prison by the Spanish colonial government for her participation in a Cuban rebel plot. Reporters for William Randolph Hearst found Cisneros while incarcerated in Las Recogidas, the Havana jail for women. Hearst had been searching for a cause that Americans could rally around to support the war and, incidentally, to increase the paper's circulation. The young and beautiful Evangelina had all the trappings of a romantic heroine. Within months of her discovery, she was the darling of the American media, portrayed in best Victorian fashion as a pure, innocent maiden sent to jail for refusing the advances of a lascivious Spanish officer. The *Journal*'s campaign, a sophisticated media extravaganza aimed mostly at American women, turned Evangelina into the personification of Cuba itself, someone who needed to be rescued. The *Journal* "enlisted the women of America" to collect thousands of signatures demanding Evangelina's release. As might be expected, newspaper sales soared, particularly when the Journal managed to plot the prisoner's escape. Brought to the United States, Cisneros was showered with honors and receptions, including one at the White House. The message conveyed seemed to be that, just like Evangelina, Cuba would one day be brought under U.S. protection.

The ideal of womanhood, however, was not always put to the service of war, as Jane Addam's writings reveal. Addams believed that women were natural pacifists. Women's nurturing role, she argued, gave them a greater appreciation of human life, and made them more tolerant. While men tended to solve their differences by resorting to force, women's loving natures recoiled from militarism. War, the result of brutal male instincts, was a step back in the march toward a civilized society based on reason and cooperation. When the Spanish-American War broke out, Addams found it's creeping influence everywhere. In her neighborhood, she noticed a sharp surge in crime. War propaganda affected individual behavior and threatened the security of Hull House, the settlement she had founded in Chicago. The programs for immigrants from all backgrounds could only survive in a climate of tolerance. What American society needed, Addams claimed, was to embrace a feminine, caring approach to politics.

The ambivalence with which American society treated two groups of professional women—news reporters and nurses—exemplifies both the opportunities and obstacles women faced in the last years of the 19th century. In the years before the war with Spain broke out, women journalists, for the first time in U.S. history, were sent to report on the scene of a potentially dangerous situation. In acknowledgement of the power of female readership, women correspondents went to Cuba to cover what was characterized as the human angle of the story. Once the war began, however, women reporters were sent home because it was considered inappropriate for them to be so close to battle. Female nurses also had to struggle to be allowed to serve in Cuba, and were only admitted to the Medical Corps after overcoming resistance from military personnel and after thousands of American lives had been lost for lack of good medical attention. Though performing a nurturing role, American nurses who went to Cuba did so as professionals.

The Spanish-American War can be seen as a sign of things to come. For Cuban women, the war meant exile, imprisonment, and, in some cases, death. The fruits of so many years of fighting were disappointing, but their participation in the struggle for independence forced Cuban women in to the public arena and prepared them for the increasingly active role they would play in the 20th century. As for American women, the war marked the beginning of a "new womanhood" which, though still without the ballot and still subject to manipulation, was emerging as a political and moral force.

Teresa Prados-Torreira, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of American History and History Program coordinator at Columbia College, Chicago.